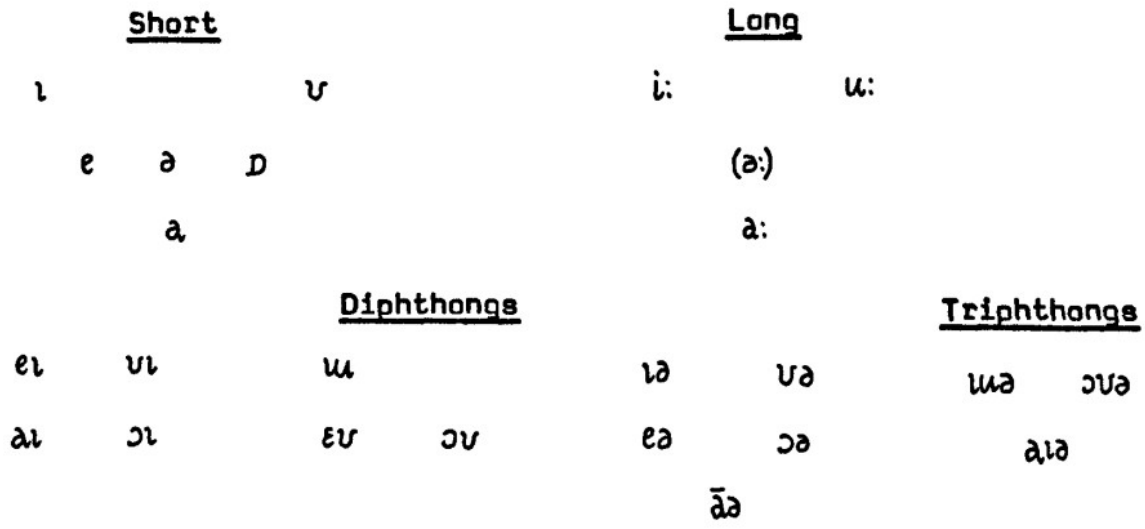
The Phonology of Wakefield in 1865

Or Why Wakefield and Windhill dialects were very similar

William Stott Banks's "A List of Provincial Words in Use at Wakefield in Yorkshire" was published in 1865, using only the Latin alphabet to indicate the phonology of the dialect. The book was included by Joseph Wright in his English Dialect Dictionary, but it is not clear if Wright had read it by the time that he published "A Grammar of the Dialect of Windhill in the West Riding of Yorkshire" in 1892. Wright's work used an early system of phonetics that is roughly similar to today's International Phonetic Alphabet, which K.M. Petyt later interpreted for the modern system. I believe that the phonology given in Banks is almost exactly the same as in Wright. Windhill is located about 17 miles north-west of Wakefield.

Petyt transcribes Wright's Windhill phonology as below. He notes that A.J. Ellis's system for Windhill does not have āə or the three triphthongs, which he thinks is because Ellis wrongly assumes rhoticity for Windhill. Ellis also assumed rhoticity for Wakefield and, as I have argued elsewhere, I think that is less likely to be a mistake.



In Banks's preface, he makes the important definition of *eh* to represent the vowel in *serv'd*. In the definition for Meh, Banks then states that this sound occurs in the pronunciation of *meh* (me), *theh* (thou) and *sheh* (she). It seems clear to me that this is the short schwa ə and not an elongated schwa əː. Petyt notes that several descriptions of the West Yorkshire dialects state that there is no elongated schwa, but Wright included it. I consider it most likely that the Wakefield dialect only had a short schwa at the time that Banks was writing in 1865 but that it was rhotic at the time, so that *serv'd* would have been pronounced as [sərvd].

In the same introduction, Banks says that the Wakefield dialect has two sounds shut out of national English, by which he means eɪ in "eight" and "weight" and ɔʊ in "bow" (bow-tie) and "row" (of ducks). Choosing these two phoneme might seem an odd choice when diphthongs are used in these words in Received Pronunciation (or whatever you want to call it), but it seems as if the monophthongs were more popular in Banks's circles at the time that he published.

Banks gives a rough indication of Wakefield phonology in his definition for “A, E, I, O, U, Y”. Going through each line, a phoneme in Petyt can be paired with Banks’s implied phoneme.

Windhill phonemes	**Banks phonemes**
e	Where, for instance, the *a* as sounded in *bat* would be employed in the national speech, we, in some words, use the e of *send*, as in *benkt* and *shenks*;
a	but we say *band, sand, hat, hand*.
aː	In like manner we sometimes sound the *a* of *far* correctly, or at most a little broadly, as in *barley* ;
a	sometimes differently, as in *fath’r*
eə	and *fa-a' ther*.
eɪ	Where *ea* would be the vowel we have *eigh* (or e) or *ee-a*, or the *a* of *sat*. Thus—*meil, steil, speik*, for meal, steal, speak;
ɪə	*see-al, pee-al, bree-ach,* for seal, peal, breach.
eɪ a	Reach is *reich* or *rack*, as *reich it heear*; *rack o my ee*.
ɪ	In case of the *i* of p*i*ne, we use *finn’d* for *find*,
aɪ	but we also say *thine* and *mine*.
aː ʊ	The *ou* of bound is represented by *ah* or *u*, *bahnd* or *bun*;
ʊ	found is *fun*.
ʊɪ	The *oo* of such words as moon and soon is often pronounced *oo-i,* as *moo-in, soo-in*;
uː	but we say *book, look, groom, smook*,
ʊ	while *tuck* stands for took.
eə	The *a* of *bate* is usually lengthened into the dipthong *a-e* (e as in *serv'd*). I have represented this by *a-a*. (The “usually” here makes me suspect that this was often a monophthong eː instead, as was reported in Haigh’s work for Huddersfield)
ɔə	The *a* of *call*, and, indeed, a majority of the vowels are commonly drawn out in a similar manner, as *caw-ell* for call ;
ɪə	*lee-an* for lean ;
aɪə	*i-eron* for iron ;
ʊə	*go-an* for gone ; *bo-at* for boat ;
ɪʊ	*ew-se* for use.
a	And there is a broadening of the *a* of bat,
e	*e* of pet,
ɪ	*i* of pit,
ə	*i* of bird,
ɒ	*o* of pot,
ʊ	*oo* of good, (This word has ʊɪ in some other West Yorkshire dialects)
ɔɪ	*oi* of boil,
ɪʊ	*ew* of new,
ʊ	and *u* of but.

It is interesting that Banks includes the diphthongs of ɔɪ and ɪʊ with the short vowels. Wright said that all the diphthongs in the Windhill dialect have their stress on the first element. From my experience of living in the Wakefield area, the ɔɪ has both elements said quickly, whereas it is the second element in ɪʊ that is lengthened. I expect that this is why Banks did not treat them alongside the other diphthongs.

Petyt notes that ɛʊ had a very peripheral role in the Windhill phonology. One word that is features in is “few”, and this word is written as “faew” in Banks’s book. It seems likely that Banks was indicating a first element in-between [a] and [e] here, so [ɛ] seems feasible.

A.J. Ellis described William Stott Banks’s orthography of the Wakefield dialect as “tolerably systematic”. The “tolerably” indicates that Ellis had some difficulty interpreting the system. I believe that A.J. Ellis made some mistakes in his transcriptions of Banks’s book. Ellis does not use the same symbols as Wright or as the modern International Phonetic Alphabet, but it is straightforward to check how his symbols are used within the description of a given dialect.

- Ellis transcribes “haag” as **ag** when it should be **éɐ**.
- Banks makes clear that his spelling of -aa- indicates a diphthong, but Ellis sometimes transcribes this as a monophthong ***ee***. He also assumes long monophthongs in “nawther” (neither) and “o’nly” (lonely), but these seem unlikely given Banks’s phonology.
- Ellis writes **óɐ** and **úɐ** interchangeably in words. It is understandable that he was unsure which was more appropriate, but his transcriptions imply a phonemic split that is not there.
- “Athersaah” (I dare say) is transcribed as **(a)dhɐr)saa**. The vowel sound in “say” should be **éɐ** and not **aa**.
- Ellis transcribes Banks’s “heit” with an initial h, but Banks makes clear that an initial h is not sounded.
- Ellis transcribes “haah mow” as **éɐ muu**. This should be **éɐ mɔɐ** given that the word “mow” takes the same diphthong as indicated in “caw-el”.
- Ellis seems to indicate a short vowel in “beeld” with **bíld**, but Banks’s transcription suggests that this is a long vowel.

This shows how even a linguistic genius struggled to interpret the Latin alphabet as applied to an unfamiliar alphabet. This shows the importance of using standardised phonetic symbols to communicate sounds. I decided to write this essay just in case, given the decline of dialect in Wakefield, the day came when no one could realise that Banks was indicating much the same system in Wakefield as Wright was in Windhill.

Bibliography

Banks, W. S. (1865). *A List of Provincial Words in use at Wakefield in Yorkshire; with explanations, etc.* J. R. Smith.

Ellis, A. J., & Early English Text Society. (1869). *On Early English Pronunciation, with especial reference to Shakespere and Chaucer, containing an investigation of the correspondence of writing with speech in England from the Anglosaxon period to the present day ... Including a re-arrangement of Prof. F. J. Child's Memoirs on the language of Chaucer and Gower, and reprints of the rare tracts by Salesbury on English, 1547, and Welch, 1567. ... By A. J. Ellis. pt. I.-V.*

Petyt, K. M., & University of Reading. (1977). *"Dialect" and "Accent" in the Industrial West Riding : A Study of the Changing Speech of an Urban Area.* University of Reading.

Wright, J. (1892). *A grammar of the dialect of Windhill, in the west riding of Yorkshire*. K. Paul.